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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH APPOINTS NON-TURKS TO CHURCH
SYNOD

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an attempt to ensure the viability of his institution in the face of the declining Orthodox community in Turkey, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, first among equals in the Orthodox world, appointed six non-Turkish citizen metropolitans to the church's Holy Synod. The twelve-person body has ultimate authority over theological policies of the patriarchate and the eventual election of Bartholomew's successor. Though the Treaty of Lausanne and other legal precedents suggest no direct problem with the appointments, the move raised the ire of Turkish secularist nationalists and sparked a wave of attention in the Turkish press. How the Turkish Government and State (not always the same thing) respond to the appointments will be a test of Turkey's understanding of, and willingness to practice, religious freedom. END SUMMARY.

"Metropolitan Crisis"

2. (U) Bartholomew's move represented the first time in the 80-year history of the Republic of Turkey that non-citizens have been included in the Synod. The six new appointments to the 12-member body, which went into effect on March 1, include metropolitans from Greece (Crete and Rhodes), the UK, New Zealand, Finland, and the United States (Metropolitan Demetrios). Six Turkish citizens remain members. The appointments sparked a flurry of attention in the Turkish press, with several articles alleging that the Patriarch was in violation of the Lausanne Treaty. To date, Bartholomew has been careful to avoid the appearance of "challenging" the Turkish state, and has not yet responded to many requests for interviews on the subject.

3. (U) However, as a number of press commentators pointed out below the sensational headlines, the Treaty of Lausanne makes no mention of either the Patriarch or of the Holy Synod, nor does it discuss the nationality of people serving in theological capacities in Turkey. In fact, the well-known requirement that the Patriarch and those who elect him be Turkish citizens dates from a 1923 edict from the Istanbul Governor's office, and is thus not formal Turkish legislation. Since that time, no non-Turkish citizens have been Synod members, though the current Patriarch's predecessor, Athenagoras, was a U.S. citizen who was automatically naturalized upon arrival in Istanbul in 1948. It is noteworthy that Athenagoras' situation was a unique confluence of interests, in that his Patriarchal status was approved by Greece, Turkey, and the United States. He reportedly arrived in Turkey on a plane lent to him by then-President Harry Truman.

4. (U) Press coverage, while initially somewhat sensationalist, has not been bombastic. However, a series of inaccuracies in press reporting has clouded the issue. Papers variously (and inaccurately) have reported that: the new appointees have been "hired" by the Patriarch and will work in Turkey; the appointees will live in Turkey and cannot simply enter as tourists; Turkish citizens were "removed" to make way for foreigners (partially true: the previous incumbents were too old or infirm to carry out their duties, and were retired); the appointments are a direct contravention of the Lausanne Treaty (no specific articles cited).

Demographic and Political Concerns

5. (SBU) Poloff met March 6 with Metropolitan Meliton, Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod. Per Meliton, the appointments

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were intended as one way to deal with Turkey's shrinking Greek community. With around 2,000 Greeks left in Turkey, few able Metropolitans remain. The six newly-appointed Synod members are filling spots previously held by Turkish citizens

now too old and infirm to participate effectively. Though none of the new appointees are young, per Meliton, establishing a precedent for non-Turkish citizen participation in the Synod is crucial to the continuance of the patriarchate in Turkey. Meliton reports that in August 2003, prior to the new appointments, the Patriarch sent letters to both the MFA and Prime Minister's office which outlined his proposal for putting non-Turkish citizens on the Synod. No reply has been received to date.

16. (SBU) Though neither the GoT nor any organ of the Turkish State (e.g. the MFA) has given a public reaction to date, Meliton says he has heard that both the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and other portions of the Turkish security establishment are unhappy with the new appointments. Separately, former Foreign Minister Iltur Turkmen confirmed to poloff that some within the GoT will find the appointments objectionable, and expressed some surprise that the Ministry of the Interior hasn't spoken out to date. Turkmen speculated that there may be legal problems with the appointments, though he said he was not an expert in minority legal matters.

Comment

17. (SBU) The appointment of six non-Turkish citizens to the Synod is a bid to lengthen the life-span of the patriarchate in Istanbul. With only 2,000 Greeks left, finding qualified senior theologians in Turkey is becoming impossible. Appointing foreigners to these posts also strengthens the Patriarch's hand within the larger Orthodox world, and helps the Patriarch appear in touch with his far-flung communities. The appointments represent no threat to Turkey's interests; indeed, by strengthening the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Turkey enhances its position. However, elements of the Turkish secularist-nationalist establishment are likely to challenge the appointments. Demonstrating flexibility toward the needs of Turkey's minorities could be very beneficial in the run-up to possible EU accession talks. But, by choosing a path of continuing intransigence on Halki, refusal to recognize the ecumenical status of the patriarchate, and objection to participation in the Holy Synod by non-Turkish citizens, the Turkish establishment is shooting itself in the foot.

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